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ABSTRACT

The curricular and extracurricular responsibilities of teaching in a small school district require uniquely prepared teachers. Rural teachers often need additional background in instructional methods for teaching reading, content areas other than their specialty, discipline techniques, use of community resources, and individualized diagnosis and prescription. A very important issue is the delivery of college-level educational programs to teachers in isolated areas. Eastern Oregon State College has risen to the challenge of delivering services in a variety of ways. To improve instruction in reading/study skills, rural teachers and administrators should: develop a resource network; be aware of professional organizations; take advantage of small classes; be aware of their role in the reading/language arts scope and sequence; consider peer tutoring or cross-grade activities; obtain a wider skill range of materials; discuss the district's reading/language arts program; create inservice time; seek workshops as a group; target reading/study skills as an inservice focus; develop a parent-volunteer program; create communication between itinerant specialists and teachers; subscribe to professional journals; use regional college libraries; adapt instruction for gifted students; explore research in learning and teaching styles; share successful activities; look at the value of microcomputers; read current literature on reading instruction; and get additional training in reading. (DC)

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Teaching in Rural Based Reading Programs: Some Observations

by Dr. Kenneth Smith

Editor's Note: *Dr Smith currently teaches undergraduate and graduate reading courses at EOSC. He is also President of Mt. Valleys Reading Council and has published and lectured widely.*

During the last 11 years I've had the opportunity of working closely with students, teachers and administrators from many rural school districts in Wisconsin, Texas, Montana and Oregon. Many of the teachers and teachers-to-be in my graduate and undergraduate reading and special education courses (taught both on and off campus) have been from "no traffic light" communities as well as larger urban areas. This requested article includes a brief summary of some personal observations and selected issues relevant to teaching, especially the teaching of reading, in smaller more remote school districts.

Certainly there is a need for uniquely prepared teachers in smaller school districts. Currently, in the nine counties of eastern Oregon, there are seven secondary and 18 elementary schools with less than 50 students. There are another 15 secondary and 28 elementary schools with less than 150 pupils. Some common characteristics of teaching in these schools include, among others: small class sizes, no more than one teacher at each grade level in grades K-8, many split classes with one teacher responsible for two or more grade levels, few resident resource teachers or specialists focusing on reading or special education, secondary teachers responsible for at least two or three different content areas and all teachers carrying out a very wide range of extra activity such as advising, coaching, record keeping and other curricular responsibilities. Each of these characteristics place special training and continuing professional development demands on teachers who are or will be working in smaller communities.

One of these implied demands is skill in teaching and curriculum planning for multi-grade classrooms. Also, as summarized in a recent survey of rural teachers, principals and superintendents (Surwell, 1980), elementary teachers in rural schools are often expected to teacher art, library skills, music, health and physical education and dramatics in addition to the basic three R's. Specialists may teach these subjects in larger school districts. In order to organize and prepare for this, teachers-to-be need methods courses and early practicum experiences in rural settings to observe how teachers meet these multi-faceted teaching, professional and personal demands.

RURAL EDUCATION REVIEW; v5 n2 December-January 1983-1984 p2-4

RC014138

Several other findings in the Surwell (1980) study included:

1. A majority of respondents, both elementary and secondary, felt that they needed a strong background in teaching reading, much more than the minimal required preparation.
2. Secondary teachers found that most of their preservice preparation trained them to be a subject matter specialist in one endorsement area, while they needed training in at least two or more areas.
3. Most of these rural educators indicated a need for strategies in handling classroom descipline with a variety of student age groups.
4. Teachers in rural areas needed appropriate training in the effective use of resources in the community to enrich classroom programs.
5. Teachers in rural settings need to develop their competencies with individual diagnosis and the planning of unique prescriptive programs resulting from the diagnosis.
6. Rural teachers-to-be should understand the sociological implications for the teacher living and teaching in a small rural community, in contrast to those of a teacher in a large metropolitan community. (I've heard of those new arrivals in more remote districts suffering occasional "urban attacks.")

Perhaps the most important concept that permeates all aspects of rural teaching, delivery of relevant educational programs by colleges and the emotional aspects of living and teaching in a rural community is what might be called "time and distance." Driving up to 125 miles one way to a weekly 3-hour class at a college, when you get out of your school at 3:30-4:00 pm and arrive back home at midnight, is not an activity rural teachers relish. Yet, many teachers do a version of this on a regular basis. Summer school classes are another option but this demands a special commitment that requires seeing your family only on weekends, which is rough when the kids are home all day. What seems ideal to many teachers is a course taught by a campus professor in their home school one evening a week or in a series of Friday-Saturday workshops in their communities. When well organized and uniquely tailored, this often works out very well. However, in many colleges this usually requires the faculty member to teach such classes on top of a full load of regular campus courses and responsibilities. Therefore, there are real pressures placed on a college's extended campus and continuing education programs to systematically meet their multitude of very real and legitimate requests from rural teachers.

It is for these reasons that a college, as part of its professional commitment and regional mission, must *genuinely* take up the challenge of unique delivery of services to rural school districts. Eastern Oregon State College has truly risen to this challenge in a variety of ways I have not observed in other colleges or universities, where many faculty members and administrators actually view rural education as simply being located in a "rural" area. This is not new to readers of *RER* who are well aware of regional programs such as EOSC's Rural Education Development Center and Rural Education Consortium as well as the Rural Based Teacher Development Project and other systematic delivery programs brought to the region by the Division of Continuing Education.

Another course delivery system that many teachers request is an individualized reading and conference in which the teacher is assigned a book, given specific reading and writing assignments and then meets periodically with the professor to ask questions, then mails in assignments. Since my doctoral students days at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I've been a student of learning and teaching styles. In my experience with individualized reading and conferences designed for teachers in the field, I've found that some teachers' unique styles of learning are not conducive to this teaching style or format. Considerable self-motivation and self-discipline are also required. They need the opportunity for questions and the support and reinforcement of testing ideas in group discussions. Some teachers, however, thrive on this type of individualized work, especially when it is directly designed around their practical day-to-day teaching experiences and demands.

At this point, I would like to make some suggestions and mention some points that might be useful to teachers and administrators in rural communities as they develop and improve their teaching of reading/study skills K-12.

1. Make every effort to develop a network of resources for services and information related to reading/study skills which includes State Department of Education, teachers committed to this field from your district and other districts, professional education groups and interested community members. The Oregon Department of Education is currently setting up four regional Language Arts Cadres to provide a variety of related services and networks throughout the state.
2. Be aware of the focus of local or regional professional organizations. Encourage joint meetings that might focus on reading/language arts or special education issues. Local and state chapters of the International Reading Association (IRA), Phi Delta Kappa (PDK), National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and other groups are often very active in rural areas and can provide some important professional networking. Conferences can also attract many speakers and publisher's representatives, who might not normally come to an area very often. Co-sponsored programs with a school district and professional group can also be quite effective.
3. Take advantage of the small classes. There may be more time for individualized diagnostic teaching and opportunities for writing and good responses by instructors. Shared teaching groups with other teachers may also be easier than in larger schools.
4. Be sure each teacher is aware of his or her role in the scope and sequence of skills you're all working together to develop in reading/language arts. In multi-grade classes, teachers can't think in terms of fourth grade or second grade skills. Each student must have an individualized program that allows learning to his or her ability level. A teacher will have a much wider range of skills to work with.
5. Consider peer tutoring or cross-grade activities.
6. Consider a wider skill range of materials by purchasing fewer books and materials each grade level.
7. Develop a mechanism for continuous discussion of the reading/language arts program in your district.

What is it? How does it fit together? Go through some of the R2R evaluation matierials, or something similar, and look for any holes in the K-12 sequencing. Include some community members in these discussions. They may turnout to be appropriate and useful volunteers. Make a presentation to your school board explaining what the program is all about.

8. Create some on-going inservice time to share "Who's doing what in terms of reading/study skills?" and "What works and what doesn't?" This may lead to common resource files and shared ideas. You may also find that you have the needed "expertise" in your own community for speakers inservice needs.

9. When seeking some workshop or specific class-like activity from a college, get together the names, addresses and phone numbers of a group of interested people, along with some convenient times when they would be willing to meet, then approach the campus program for providing continuing education. This will save time and will make a stronger case than one person calling in or telling your campus advisor of an interest.

10. Work closely as a district to target reading/study skills as an area for inservice focus. Joint work with a district and college will usually yield more effective programs than either alone. Professional groups may also be of assistance here.

11. Take a careful look at developing a parent-volunteer program for your reading program. Selection and training processes are essential elements, but the sense of community in smaller towns can be an advantage.

12. Be sure you create a clear and workable channel of communication between the remedial and corrective services provided by the itinerant specialist either in reading or special education and the regular classroom teacher. Developing and focusing diagnostic skills and activities as well as remedial procedures is very important for rural teachers.

13. Subscribe to some journals for every teacher's lounge. *The Reading Teacher* and *Language Arts* are excellent examples of useful journals for elementary teachers. Copies of *Journal of Reading* should be available to all content teachers in secondary classrooms. Each district might also have available *The Annual Summary of Investigations Relating To Reading* published each year by the International Reading Association. This is an annotated bibliography of all research studies in reading from hundreds of journals and other sources published in the preceeding year.

14. Use regional college libraries, as they have excellent computer literature search capabilities for very little money. One doesn't need to be a current student.

15. Currently state department, professional groups and local teachers are very much interested in adapting regular class instruction to meet the needs of talented and gifted (TAG) students. In-class modification techniques are most requested in rural districts where time and distance make pull-out programs difficult. Challenging programs that enhance the use of reading and writing skills should be encouraged.

16. Since learning (cognitive) styles and teaching styles are currently being explored and more systematically focused on, especially as they relate to the teaching of reading (Carbo, 1981; Smith, 1983), rural teachers should explore this area, especially as it relates to individualized instruction in multi-grade classes and teacher burnout.

17. Have secondary content teachers systematically share with each other the successful activities that they use to encourage reading/writing/study skills development in their classes.

18. Take a cautious look at the value of micro computers for reading and language arts instructions. Real time-saving potential may exist for their use in small districts with scope and sequence record keeping and networking with other systems in the region. The practical aspects of classroom micro computer use by teachers and students are currently being studied. Develop some inservice activities to explore student literacy, as well as appropriate soft-ware applications to reading and language arts.

19. Read through the literature and summaries of the current state of reading instruction and achievement issues facing reading educators, such as declining test scores, minimal state competencies for high school graduation and the value of a focus on strong coding programs when selecting basal text series. This is necessary in order to effectively plan district reading programs inservice directions and in working with parents in your community. One such excellent summary is Chall (1983).

20. Teachers-to-be should get additional training or an endorsement in reading. This may help in finding jobs in some rural districts.

In closing, let me say simply that I understand those of us who measure distance in terms of hours, work to improve the teaching of reading and indentify with Willie Nelson when he's "On the road again....."

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